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threads best tips

A clear solution for tangled thread

Does your stored thread become a tangled mess of loose, unwound ends? Here's an easy, inexpensive alternative to the commercially packaged vinyl strips (one version is called Thread-Wrap) that keeps any size spool of sewing or serger thread tidy.

Buy a 1-yard length of clear vinyl at the fabric store. Using a rotary cutter or scissors, cut the vinyl into 1- by 6-inch strips (for a custom fit, increase or decrease the dimensions of the strips to correspond to the height or circumference of the spools you frequently use). Simply wrap one strip around a spool and, as it clings to itself, the thread end is held in place.

Commercially packaged strips cost about 50 cents apiece, compared to pennies when you cut them yourself. And 1 yard of vinyl will probably provide you with all the securing strips you'll ever need.

—Connie Quarré, Bellevue, Washington

Easy hem marking

You can simplify the process of marking and measuring a long, straight hemline by using the presser foot on your sewing machine and a mark on the needle plate as guides. Measure the distance you need from the inside edge of the foot to the needle plate, marking that distance with a pre-existing line on the plate or a Post-it Note. Slide the fabric under the raised foot, keeping the raw edge against the mark on the plate, and mark the hemline with a marker held against the edge of the presser foot as you slide the fabric along.

—Donna Dunann, Canyon Lake, California

Bead samples

At a recent gem trade show, I saw a woman with the perfect way to carry samples of all her seed beads: around her neck was a cord holding a wire shower-curtain ring. The ring held samples of her bead collection, strung on 3-inch lengths of monofilament thread with a loop at one end.

I have too many seed beads to recall the colors in my stash, and this method helps prevent buying duplicates. I sort my beads by type: natural stones and pearls, delicas, metals—but they could be sorted by size, color, or whatever works for you. So far, not a single strand has ever broken, making this a very durable and compact system.

—Linda Boston, Woodbury, Connecticut

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Storing notion directions

Whenever I buy a new notion or gadget, I save the manufacturer's directions in a plastic pocket-sheet that snaps into a three-ring binder. However rarely I use the item, I can always find the directions. As my collection grows, I organize the directions into categories, making them even easier to find.

—Jan Mahusky, Painesville, Ohio

Machine-stitched gift wrap

A fancy version of the machine-stitched bags that hold bulk grains and pet food can make an attractive and amusing gift wrap. Place the gift inside a fresh paper bag and seal it shut with several rows of machine stitching as plain or decorative as you please. Leave long tails on the ends of the threads so you can tie them into bows with dangling streamers. I use my dull machine needles for this, which is satisfying in itself.

—Emma Olmsetad, Santa Rosa, California

Basting leather or vinyl

Basting is difficult and pinning is impossible when you're working with leather or vinyl. My solution is to use staples in the seam allowance. You can use almost any stapler, but the pliers type is handier than the desktop version. After you've done the stitching, you can easily remove the staples with a small pair of needle-nose pliers or a staple remover.

—Betty Sager, Spring Valley, California

Quick spaghetti straps

Here's an easy way to make spaghetti straps and trims out of tricot knits. Cut a strip of tricot ¾ inch wide on the lengthwise grain of the fabric. Pull the strip taut (raw edges do not fray) until it rolls into a cord. Then run the cord through your zigzag sewing machine, set on a wide zigzag stitch. You can span the roll with a stitch, adding a decorative accent if the thread is a different color. Or you can match the thread for a more subtle effect.

—Jean Good, East Earl, Pennsylvania

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Thread catcher

I have a way of configuring a bag to catch threads and cuttings under my serger or sewing machine. After cutting and folding the bag as shown above, I either tape or tuck it under the edge of my machine.

—Nellie Dery, Van Wert, Ohio

Gathering net

Recently I had to gather yards and yards of net for cancan skirts. Wanting a quicker method, I decided to experiment with elastic thread. I set my zigzag machine on a large stitch (8 stitches to the inch) and zigzagged over the elastic thread, pulling it tightly. The netting automatically gathered up evenly and was ready for sewing onto the skirt. I was able to make some adjustments with the elastic as I attached it to the base cloth. It was simple to remove the elastic so that the visible line of stitching on the front was smooth. All I had to do was clip it with sharp, pointed scissors and pull.

—Judith R. Shamp, Indianapolis, Indiana

Handy third hand

Your sewing machine can double as a third hand, or sewing bird, for easier ripping and handsewing. Put your work under the presser foot—feed dogs and needle up—and drop the foot. If the fabric is fragile or slips, put a wide rubber band between the fabric and the presser foot (see drawing below). I have a machine with a quick-changing foot system, so I take one of the feet I rarely use and wrap it with a rubber band. I pop it on for lengthy ripping jobs.

—Marianne Kantor, Bondville, Vermont

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—Nellie Dery, Van Wert, Ohio

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Storing Interfacing

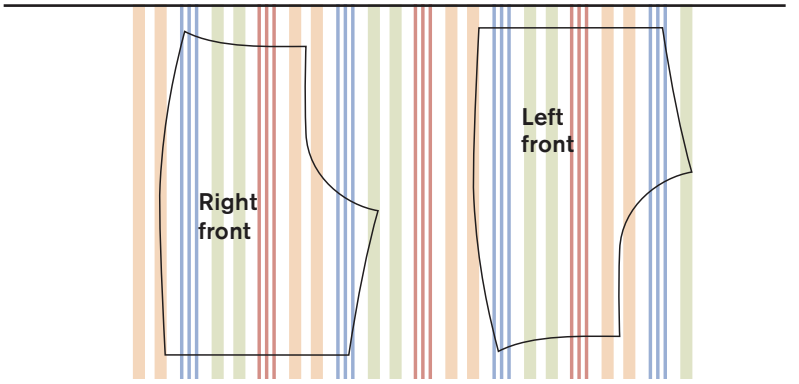
Anyone who sews has to solve the problem of sorting and storing interfacings. I make and envelope for each type from the plastic instruction sheet. I fold the sheet and machine-sew the sides. Not only is this pocket, or envelope, quick and easy to make, but you'll know which interfacing is stored inside, and the instructions will always be there. It's great for storing all the scraps too.

—Lynne Teichman, Lewisburg, Pennsylvania

Balancing uneven stripes

To achieve a balanced appearance when working with uneven stripes, cut pairs of pieces (two fronts and two backs) with their hemlines in opposite orientation on the fabric; align key stripes in the same position on each, as shown below.

—Gayla Gardner, Houston, Texas



A sheer secret

Use tiny brass safety pins as tools for quickly transferring garment-construction marks to delicate, sheer fabrics like chiffon. The pins won't mar the fabric or fall out when you move it.

—Claire Shaeffer, Palm Springs, California

Buttons in half the time

Sewing buttons onto a garment goes twice as fast if you fold the thread in half and pull the folded end through the needle's eye until the folded and free ends meet. Now you can sew with four threads instead of two. Leave a long tail on the underside of the garment, sew through each pair of holes in the button twice and knot securely on the back. The button will be as strongly attached as if you had sewn through each pair of holes eight times with a single strand.

—Mary Applegate, Hershey, Pennsylvania

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No-snag elastic

When making elastic waistbands or cuffs, baste down both edges of any seam allowances within the casing before you sew it closed. Pulling the elastic past these seams will be easier.

—Lisa Weatherall, Bloomington, Indiana

To thread a needle

This is a simple hint, but it makes threading needles much easier. Cut the thread on a slant. Hold the thread as close as possible to its cut end; hold the needle so that you can easily see the eye. (Holding it up against a white background helps.) Now push the eye of the needle over the thread, instead of pushing the thread into the eye. (If the thread is limp or frayed, try waxing where you cut.)

—Mary E. Weaver, Savannah, Georgia

Edging Lingerie

For an attractive scallop-edge finish on lingerie or lightweight garments, I use the blind stitch on my machine. First, finish the edge by serging, or turn the raw edge under ¼ inch; then fold on the seam allowance and press. Do a test strip by setting the stitch width to the widest setting (4) and the stitch length in the middle (2). With the wrong side up, put the fabric under the presser foot with the edge to the left and the garment to the right of the needle. Feed the fabric through so that when the occasional zigzag stitch bites, it grabs just outside the finished edge. It is this zigzag stitch that forms the scalloped edge.

—Elizabeth Rudman, Santa Fe, New Mexico

To soften an itchy sweater

Sheep's wool is in many ways like human hair. After washing a woolen sweater, I rinse it with vinegar to restore the pH balance. If it's itchy, I soften it with a mixture of 2 tbsp. to 6 tbsp. of hair conditioner and a minimum amount of water, which I spread over the entire garment and between the fibers. After a few minutes, I rinse the sweater thoroughly, towel-dry it, and lay it flat to finish drying.

—Shelly Karpilow, Berkeley, California

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Organize trims

I needed a way to disentangle and organize my stash of by-the-yard novelty trims, elastics, and ribbons. So I glued several thicknesses of felt around the outside of a 2-inch-diameter PVC pipe. I wrapped strands of ribbon, seam binding, and other such notions around the pipe, offset the end of each strand, and pinned it to the felt. I mounted the pipe onto a café-style curtain rod and hung it on the wall.

When I want trim, I simply unroll a length, snip off what I need, and repin the end. It's easy to see my inventory, and my trims and ribbons don't get tangled, wrinkled, or damaged.

—Mary Mooney, New York, New York

Easy serger threading

To thread the needle of my serger, I remove the needle, thread it from the grooved side, and replace it in the serger.

—Shirley A. Nooyen, Elk Grove, California

To thread, fold

To thread a needle quickly for sewing or stitchery, wrap the thread tightly around the needle, and then slip it off, holding the thread firmly between your thumb and forefinger, close to the creased fold line. Then push the needle between your thumb and forefinger to thread it.

When the folded thread has gone through the eye, you can easily pick it up on the other side and bring the strand through.

—Susan Morin, Seekonk, Massachusetts

Point thread right

Thread a needle with the end of the thread that leads off the spool. Thread is spun so that this end will slip through the eye more easily than the other end.

—Lois Morrison, Leonia, New Jersey

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Correcting shifting necklines

Sometimes a heavy collar or an elaborate back treatment shifts the neckline of a garment as you wear it. I slip small, round dress or drapery weights into the front points of covered shoulder pads to equalize the weight. I put the weights inside the pad on the body side to ensure a smooth bodice front.

—Phyllis Rosen, Aiken, South Carolina

Partial lining for handmade camisoles

I find that underwear is always a problem with knit or crocheted cotton camisoles, so I cut out bias triangular pieces of voile or any light lining material in a skin tone. I allow a ½-inch turn under and slipstitch the pieces in place at the bust area. The little triangles keep me from feeling exposed and eliminate the need for a full lining or cumbersome underwear.

—Dianne Boate, San Francisco, California

Making designer labels

I use white ⅜-inch satin ribbon and textile paints to make color-coordinated labels for the garments I knit. The paints, nontoxic acrylics, are available at hobby shops in a variety of mixable colors. They come in ready-to use 1 oz. bottles. I use Badger Air-Tex textile air-brush colors (Badger Air-Brush Co., 9128 W. Belmont Avenue, Franklin Park, IL 60131; 708-678-3104).

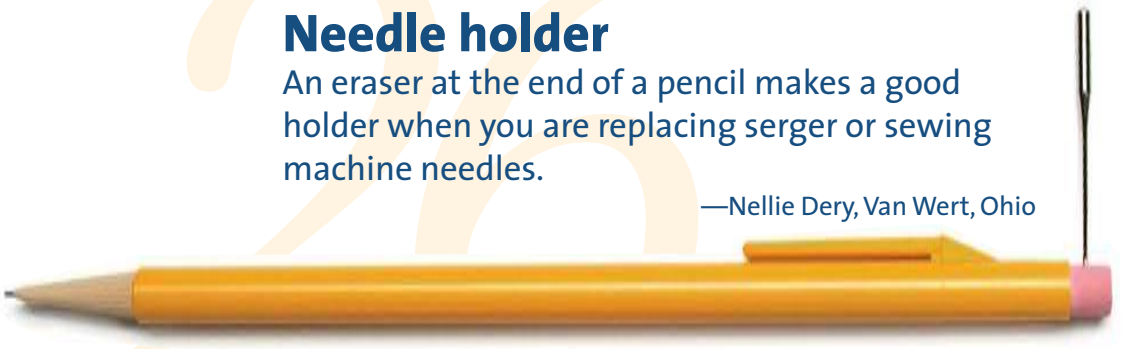
Paint a length of ribbon, being sure to saturate the fabric. After it has dried, set the colors with an iron. Then, using a fine-point indelible pen, write your labels. The paint works like sizing and prevents the ink from bleeding. Wash out any excess dye. If you prefer white labels, use white paint.

—Mary Louse Vidas, Mount Airy, North Carolina

Needle holder

An eraser at the end of a pencil makes a good holder when you are replacing serger or sewing machine needles.

—Nellie Dery, Van Wert, Ohio



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Long Seam Roll

My local lumber company carries a perfect seam roll that's long enough so you can press pants seams open without having to move them. It's a 3-foot to 4-foot length of 1½-inch-diameter stair railing. The railing is nice and round on the top, so seam allowances don't press through to the garment; and the bottom is flat, so it stays put on the ironing board. Select a smooth piece of rail, and the only finishing is to glue felt to the rough, cut ends.

—Mrs. T. VanderMolen, Grand Rapids, Michigan

Matching buttons

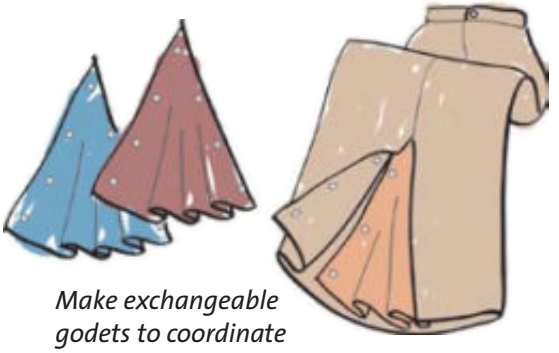
I used to be frustrated when I tried to match a card of buttons to my fabric swatch, as I could never really lay the button on the fabric. Now I snip a 1-inch slit in my swatch and button the card of buttons onto the fabric.

—Jeannie K. McCormic, Many, Louisiana

Removable godets make for a quick change

Transform the mood of a plain skirt by inserting a removable godet into the garment's slit. As occasions vary, so can the godets you use. To make the pattern, measure the length of the slit in your skirt and add 2 inches for finishing and hemming the edges. Use that dimension to cut a bias triangle of contrasting fabric, then finish the sides and hem the bottom. Sew corresponding snaps to the inner edges of the skirt's slit and the godet edges. Sew the first snap at the top of the slit and enough snaps on each side, between the top and hem, to prevent gaps. So go ahead and make godets to coordinate with different tops to change your look in a snap.

—Beth Wehrman, Maxwell, Iowa



Make exchangeable godets to coordinate with blouses or jackets.

Preserving old patterns

When my favorite tissue-paper pattern started falling apart, I decided to bond it to freezer paper. Lay the pattern piece face down, and then place the freezer paper on top of it with the shiny side down. Press with a medium-hot iron.

—Barbara Burnett, Fort Worth, Texas

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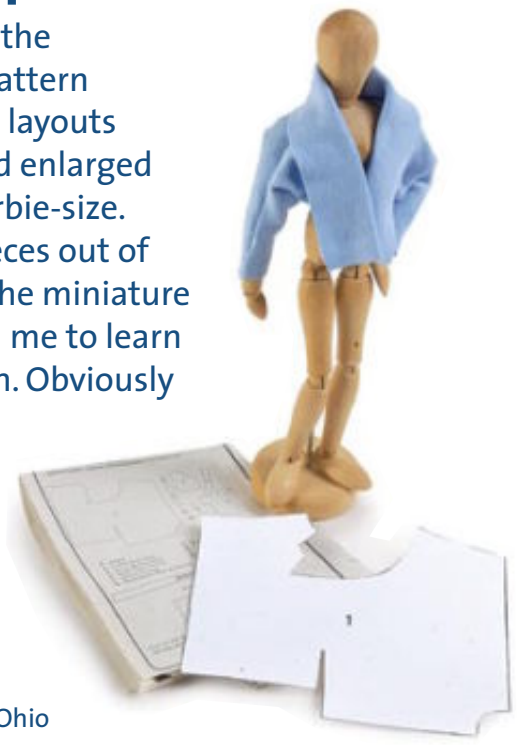
Mini patterns help visualize design

I was having trouble following the directions on a new designer pattern until I photocopied the pattern layouts from the instruction sheets and enlarged the pattern pieces to about Barbie-size. Then I cut the main pattern pieces out of lightweight fabric and sewed the miniature pieces together, which enabled me to learn how the design should be sewn. Obviously it's not incredibly accurate, but it's enough for me to get the picture. I was then able to successfully cut and sew the pattern from expensive fabric and save myself much agony, doubt, and possibly money.

—Maureen Tayse Miller, New Carlisle, Ohio



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—Jeannie K. McCormic, Many, Louisiana

Making sweater "muslins"

Before starting a sweater in a pattern I've never made, I make a "muslin," or test garment, in inexpensive knit yardage. I use the measurements given in the pattern to make a paper pattern, then serge an inexpensive model of the garment to check the size and drape. Then, armed with my gauge swatch and the model sweater, I can easily adjust the pattern before casting on a single stitch.

—Nan D. Carlson, Newark, New York

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Ballpoint stitch remover

I save a lot of time when I need to remove a few stitches by using a ballpoint sewing-machine needle that I keep handy in my pin cushion. It's longer and firmer than a pin and easier to pick up quickly; and it slides under the stitch without ever snagging the fabric.

—Carol MacPhail, Wethersfield, Connecticut

Hemming ruffles

I've always dreaded having to hand-roll ruffle hems (especially circular ruffles) on fine fabrics, so I finally came up with a timesaving solution. Draw the ruffles on the fabric, zigzag in a very fine stitch along the drawn lines, and cut out the ruffles as close to the machine-stitched hems as possible. There'll be no stretching, no puckering, and no fabric getting caught in the machine.

—Marianna Krajewska, Beverly Hills, California

Preshrinking seam tape

It's a good idea to preshrink seam tape, twill tape, etc., with your fabric. To avoid having to press it when it dries, wrap the damp tape around a large jar to dry.

—Jan Jasper
New York, New York

Timesaving tricks for pressing

You can simplify pressing dresses and blouses with elastic waists or wrists if you attach a drawstring to each end of the elastic. Make it long enough to loosen the gathers until the fabric is flat for pressing; then draw it up and tie a loop knot for wearing. When you're sewing a blouse, if you make the sleeve plackets extra long, ironing will be much easier.

Pants creases and pleats will stay sharp if you baste them in before washing. Remove the basting threads after drying and pressing. Wool pants are also easier to press without the linings. Turn the lining into long underwear to wear with the pants by putting elastic in the waist. Or loosen the lining at the hem for easier pressing.

—Susan Herrmann, Damascus, Ohio

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Instant spot deodorizer

In our theatrical costume shop, we must sometimes make emergency alterations or press musty or perspired garments that we can't wash or dry-clean first. We've found that the odors can be removed with vodka. Spray full-strength vodka lightly on the garment immediately before pressing. The vodka evaporates odors away and leaves no smell.

—Joan Morris, Hartford, Vermont

Stitching an accurate edge

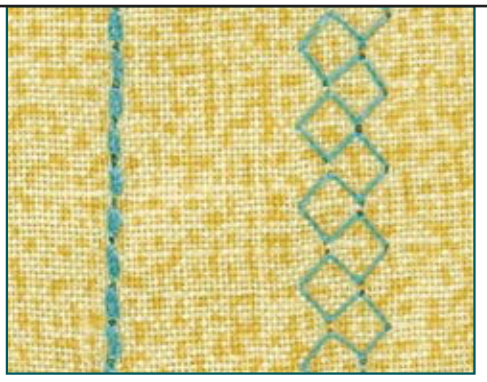
When topstitching near edges, the needle tends to roll off the fabric because there is an uneven surface under the presser foot. Place a piece of cardboard or fabric of the same thickness as the fabric edge under the low side of the presser foot. This will let you stitch with perfect control.

—Elaine MacKay, Thamesford, Ontario, Canada

Zero width decorative stitch goes straight

I want to share a little trick I learned for sewing solid three-thread decorative lines: Use the honeycomb stitch (most often used with wing needles for heirloom sewing or fagoting), and set the stitch width to zero to make a triple stitch.

—Jane Tutton, Vero Beach, Florida



The nesting urge

Here's a tip for nature-loving sewers: Make a small bag to hang by your sewing machine, or use an empty onion bag; from now until next spring, put thread pieces and tiny bits of fabric into it. Come spring, spread the scraps over your bushes or hang the onion bag in a tree. The birds will quickly snatch the nest lining material, and that may give you a few more birds around to eat bothersome mosquitoes and the bugs in your garden during the summer.

—Marie Dorok, Stratford, Connecticut

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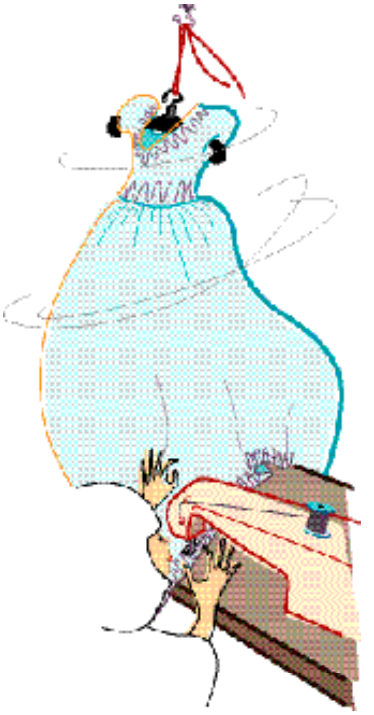
Hook and loop rigging

I've come up with a method that saves me from wrestling big, bulky garments (like long gowns) at my sewing machine: I installed a large hook in the ceiling over my machine and about a foot to the left of the needle. I loop a strong cord about 4 feet long over the hook and tie it at the appropriate height to hang a garment on a swivel hanger so I can sew around the hem and turn it. This system keeps the garment weight and bulk suspended and out of the way.

This method helped me sew yards and yards of ruffle around the bottom of a slipcover. I clipped a couple of skirt hangers onto the slipcover body and hung them together from the loop. This worked great.

I have used this hook method for years, and finally decided I should share the idea with the rest of the sewing world.

—Patty Smith, Merion, Pennsylvania



Thread tension

To check or adjust the thread tension of your sewing machine, thread the bobbin and top with different colors. When you sew your sample, it's easier to see if the tensions are correct.

—Edith Frankel,
Hannawa Falls, New York

Preventing wrinkles in transit

To keep the dresses I mail to my granddaughters from arriving wrinkled, I use balloons for packing material. I blow up a small balloon in each sleeve, a larger one in the bodice, and one or two in the skirt. Even taffeta dresses arrive without wrinkles. Sometimes I add small balloons to fill in the empty spaces. And my "hot air" adds neither weight nor cost.

—Ginny Groat, Watkinsville, Georgia

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Hand-felting tools

I use a wire cake-cooling rack instead of a scrubboard to make felt from carded wool fleece. My rack is about 10 inches square, and the wires are spaced about ½ inch apart. Rubbing the soapy fleece across the wires works beautifully. The pieces of leftover soap, which I save in a small Turkish towel bag, can be used to soap fleece as well as the human body.

—Charlotte Stafford, Chesterland, Ohio

Using multisized patterns

I like to use multisized patterns over and over in different sizes for my growing son. Before I lay the pattern tissue on the fabric, I clip the curved areas of the pattern tissue perpendicular to the cutting line and just up to the smallest size as though I were clipping curves in a sewn garment. Where there is a sharp curve, such as in the neck area, I may make six to eight clips. For a raglan or drop-shoulder sleeve, I may make only three or four clips.

I then fold the tissue along the proper cutting line and cut out my fabric. When I need to use the pattern for a larger size, all I do is refold the pattern along the cutting line for that size. This method also works for patterns where the garment requires more than one size to fit properly.

—Shirley Zak, Montara, California

No-wax thread waxing

Save your soap-bar remnants and use them to run your thread through for smooth, tangle-free handsewing. The soap won't dry out and splinter as commercially sold beeswax eventually does, and you won't have to worry about wax stains. Besides, it costs nothing.

—Martha McKeon, Sandy Hook, Connecticut

Tailor's pressing tools

Two traditional tailoring notions that most tailors make for themselves are a dauber for dampening limited areas, like seams, and a sleeve pad, which slips into awkward places to simplify pressing.

A dauber is a strip of soft or medium woolen cloth about 3½ inches wide, and long enough to roll tightly into a cylinder about 1 inch thick. The long edges should be unfinished. After rolling it up, whip the dauber closed with a strong thread. One dauber should last you a lifetime, and it will get better (and more ragged looking) with use. Simply dip it into water and wipe it along the area you want to press. (There's a photo of a nice old one on page 43 of *Threads* No. 10.)

Pressing pads of various shapes can be made to augment the press buck, the tailor's primary pressing aid. The one I find most useful is about 13 inches long and tapers from 6 inches wide at one end to 4½ inches wide at the other. The ends should be rounded. Cut enough layers of an old woolen blanket in this shape to make about ¾-inch stack. Fasten the layers loosely together with a few stab stitches, and cover the whole thing in a smooth cotton or heavy lining rayon. This is big help for pressing sleeve heads, sleeve hems and elbow seams.

—Stanley Hostek, Seattle, Washington

Alternative hand-sewing threads

After years of being dissatisfied with conventional and specialty threads for hand sewing, which snag, snap, and twist, I have substituted No. 8 pearl cotton and embroidery floss for many of my finishing touches to garments. I haven't found anything better for making French tacks and thread chains, or sewing snaps and buttons.

—Martha McKeon, Sandy Hook, Connecticut